

**Name:** **Comstock Law Book Banning in U.S.**

**Date:** 1851 - 1899

**Location:** North America

**Subject:** Political/Economic/Social Opinion , Other , Explicit Sexuality

**Medium:** Literature

**Artist:** Writers

**Confronting Bodies:** New York Society for the Suppression of Vice

**Date of Action:** 1873

**Specific Location:** United States

**Description of Artwork:** Many greatest classics such as Aristophanes Lysistrata, Rabelais's Gargantua, Chaucer's Canterbury tales, Boccaccio's Decameron, and the Arabian Nights.

**Description of Incident:** "...Books banned from the U. S. mails under the Comstock Law included many of the greatest classics: Aristophanes Lysistrata, Rabelais's Gargantua, Chaucer's Canterbury tales, Boccaccio's Decameron and even The Arabian Nights. Furthermore, Heins includes modern authors censored under the Comstock Law. "..Honore de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Oscar Wilde, Ernst Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Eugene O' Neil, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Clifford Odets Erskine Caldwell, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald...to name just a few." Sex, Sin and Blasphemy, Marjorie Heins pg. 19 "Founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (1872), whose slogans were: "Morals not Art and Literature!" and "Books are feeders for brothels!" Comstock campaigned tirelessly for censorship laws not only to stamp out erotic subject matter in art or literature, but to suppress information about sexuality, reproduction, and birth control. In 1873 he persuaded Congress (after less than an hour of debate) to pass the law (Federal Anti-Obscenity Act)that banned the mailing of materials found to be "lewd", "indecent", "filthy", or "obscene." Sex, Sin and Blasphemy, Marjorie Heins pg. 19 Furthermore Comstock was appointed a special agent of the U.S. Post Office, as such allowed to carry a gun and attack pornographers." (The Encyclopedia of Censorship, Jonathon Green, Facts on File , N.Y.C. Pg. 62-63) Over the next forty years Comstock prosecuted 3,500 individuals (although no more than 10% were found guilty) and had destroyed 120 tons of literature.

**Results of Incident:** "..The Comstock Law remains on the books today, although the ban on information about birth control has been eliminated. In 1896 the court ruled that the federal Comstock Law didn<sup>1</sup>t cover vulgar insults." Sex, Sin, and Blasphemy, Marjorie Heins, pg.19

**Source:** New York Public Library, New York City